Escalante Massacre over sugar plantations, Negros Occidental, the Philippines

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The province of Negros Occidental is a province made prosperous by the sugar industry. For hundreds of years, it had exported sugar and sugar products from land concentrated and under the control of the elite, the sugar plantation owners or *hacienderos.* The land workers were left landless and earned their living as farm labor, or *sacadas.* Social tension was always high in the province because of this situation [1].

In the late 1970s, world sugar prices collapsed. Negros was suffering from the aftermath of the collapse of the sugar industry due to the end, in 1974, of a US quota system that had previously ensured markets for Negros sugar, compounded by Marcos's alleged plunder of the industry under martial law through the operations of the Philippine Sugar Commission (PHILSUCOM) and the National Sugar Trading Corporation (NASUTRA). [3] Across Negros, production had slowed down or worse, stood still. Half a million farmworkers lost their livelihoods and hundreds of thousands of children faced hunger and death [1].

For the *sacadas* in Negros, life under the martial law regime by Ferdinard Marcos (1972-1986) became much worse. Farm wages stayed very low. Marcos promised to break up land monopolies and distribute land to the landless, causing a few to hope, but the promises remained on paper. Soldiers and paramilitary forces (Citizens' Home Defense Forces or CHDF) stalked rural Negros, stealing from people, burning villages, and kidnapping and assassinating local farm leaders [1].

When the sugar crisis exploded in the late 1970s, the sacadas, and even a small number of enlightened landowners, said they have had enough. This triggered many protest marches, demanding agrarian reform and land distribution, fair wages, and improved government services [1].

By 1985, the 13th year of the Marcos dictatorship, a nationwide movement called for coordinated protests on the occasion of the

13th anniversary of the declaration of martial law. It was called the *Welgang Bayan* (general strike), with participants from most cities and towns, north to south of the country [1].

Northern responded to this call by organizing its own three-day *welgang bayan.* It was to start on the 19th and end on the 21st of September at the town of New Escalante, 95 kilometers north of Bacolod City, the provincial capital. Thousands joined the strike. On the night of the 18th of September, the eve of the three-day action, protesters began with an overnight vigil in front of the Escalante town hall. On the morning of the 19th of September, Day One of the Escalante *Welgang Bayan,* people poured in to join the protest action. They came from the town centers and from other areas. They were sugar workers, farmers, fisherfolk, students, urban poor, professionals, and church people [1].

By day two, the 20th of September, protesters filled the roads to the Escalante town hall. They held banners, gave speeches, and chanted slogans. Fully-armed soldiers, policemen, and paramilitary forces (CHDF) surrounded them. Firetrucks were ready to disperse the crowd. A machine gun also stood at the rooftop of the town hall, ready to spew fire. At around noon, the fire trucks blasted water on the ranks of protesters but failed to break the protest line [1].

After the water cannons came tear gas. The protesters, particularly those in the frontlines, linked their arms, chanting: "*Bigas, hindi tear gas*! (We need rice, not teargas!)" They also told each other: *"Makibaka, huwag matakot!* (Struggle, keep fear at bay!)." The crowd was surrounded by members of the Regional Special Action Force (RSAF) and the Civilian Home Defense Forces (CHDF) [1].

When some protestors threw back the tear gas canisters into the empty plaza, the paramilitary forces, who would later allege that a few "trouble-makers" tried to grab their weapons, opened fire into the masses. The firing came from the CHDF, the police, and the soldiers. As it happened, the protesters massed in front of the town hall were mostly *sacadas* and a few student leaders. Several farmworkers and one student leader were killed instantly. Others tried to run to the canefields and ricefields lying next the town hall. But the armed forces pursued them, shooting several more dead. Twenty in all were slain that day, with bullet wounds mostly on the back and the side. [1]

Escalante Martyrs: ALEGRE, William; DAYANAN, Michael; DEMEGILIO, Rodney; FRANCO, Rovena; JARAVELLO, Juvelyn;

LABATOS, Alex; LAPE, Angelina; LOCANILAO, Norberto; MAHINAY, Rodolfo; MEGALLEN, Rogelio Jr.; MONARES, Claro; MONDEJAR, Maria Luz; MONTEALTO, Rodolfo; ORNOPIA, Aniano; OROT, Nenita; SALILI, Edgardo; SANTA ANA, Ronilo; SUAREZ, Juanito Jr.; TAN, Manuel; TEJONES, Caesar [1]

From that year, the company Teatro Obrero (Workers' Theatre) - the 'cultural arm' of the Negros Federation of Sugar Workers established in the late 1970s - stages an annual re-enactment of the massacre every September. The protesters assemble in Sagay, Toboso, and Calatrava, forming three marching groups, and walk for two to three hours to Escalante, dramatically converging to form a single body of marchers carrying torches, placards, flags, and banners when they reach the town center in the early evening of 19 September. This 'pre-event' concludes at the town plaza, where a monument now stands in honor of the victims of the massacre. A 'tribute to the martyrs' ritual is held, followed by a program of protest songs and 'cultural numbers' performed by TeatroObrero and members of the Negros Federation of Sugar Workers from the various towns. The next day, the 20th of September, they hold a memorial Mass for the dead at the Mt Carmel Church, where many of the protesters sought shelter in 1985. At noon they begin the march to the massacre site. [2]

Another case of artistic commemoration is the arts festival that marked the 32nd anniversary of the Escalante massacre celebrated in Negros Occidental, with the theme, "Pagpadayon—Continuing the Heroic Legacy of Escam". Pagpadayon aimed to inculcate a deeper historical and social awareness among young and old people by correcting misconstrued or lacking notions of the Martial Law era, especially in Negros. The festival also aims to intermingle the lessons of the past and present, by showcasing both historical and contemporary issues through artistic media. [6]

On September 18, 2019, during the 34th commemoration of the 1985 Escalante Massacre, nine activists and artists, who were on their way to perform in Escalante were illegally arrested and charged with trumped-up charges by elements of the police and the army.[4] Northern Negros Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (NNAHRA) maintained that the firearms and explosives were planted and that the team only had a sound system, leaflets, and personal effects. [5] The nine individuals arrested in 2019 were Teatro Obrero vice-chairperson Kenneth Serondo and members Carlo Apurado, Rolly Hernando, and Reynaldo Saura; National Federation of Sugar

Workers (NFSW) North Negros spokesperson Joel Guillero, Toboso chapter auditor Leon Charita, and member Benvenido Ducay; as well as KADAMAY Negros vice-chariperson Aiza Orbesa and their driver Toto Canilio. [4]

According to Karapatan vice-chairperson Reylan Vergara “The unlawful arrest of nine cultural workers at Escalante City, once again based on trumped-up charges and planted evidence, is yet another desperate attempt by the military and police to quell the growing anger of the people of Negros and to erase the memory of the Marcos regime-perpetrated massacre of sugar farmers in Escalante in 1985. Even cultural work is criminalized by the fascist Duterte government. The de-facto martial law in Negros continues to manifest itself through the spiraling state of human rights in the region,” [4]